

Greek Painters Working for Latin and Non-Orthodox Patrons in the Late Medieval Mediterranean

Some Preliminary Remarks

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During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the painters based and trained in the Byzantine metropolitan centres—Constantinople and Thessaloniki—are known to have often travelled abroad: they were much appreciated because of their widespread reputation as heirs to a centuries-old tradition of religious art; accordingly, painting was commonly celebrated as the ‘Greek’ art par excellence, as stated, for example, by the twelfth-century Latin monk Theophilus’s introductory remarks to his *Treatise on Different Arts*.¹ Because of a lack of patronage in their homeland, they were increasingly encouraged to accept invitations to work in foreign countries: émigré artists, such as Michail and Eutichius Astrapás or Manuël Eugenikos, gave an extra dimension to the fashioning of sumptuous decorative programs in such Orthodox countries as Serbia, Russia and Georgia, where they worked for royal courts, the high clergy and the bourgeoisie, the latter in the case of Theophanes the Greek, whose frescoes in the Church of the Transfiguration Saviour in Novgorod were financed by a group of lay merchants.

Meanwhile, Byzantine artists did not escape work from Latin patrons and Western countries. The most interesting case is that of the painter Markos, who is supposed to have been responsible for the frescoed decoration of several parts of the nave of Genoa Cathedral in the early fourteenth century². As indicated by the stylistic devices of his paintings, he was most probably trained in the metropolitan art of the early Palaiologan period; this is especially evident in the

classicising rendering of folds, the plastic and monumental treatment of the body and the soft modelling of the facial features; moreover, the emphatic use of primary colours reveals his connections with the stylistic trends most clearly represented by the murals of the Karyes Protaton, traditionally attributed to the Thessalonikan painter Manuel Panselinos. In other terms, Markos was a representative of the more fashionable and updated artistic milieu of early fourteenth-century Byzantium, and it was probably not by chance that he was invited to work in the most important church of Genoa. Incidentally, his work is an outstanding witness to the fact that the Greek manner of painting was not reputed to be in contrast with its Gothic architectural context; on the contrary, it proved to be an excellent way to provide it with extra embellishment, evoking the eastern Mediterranean idea of painted *decorum*.

In such a context, it is worth remarking that Markos made no special efforts to harmonise his paintings to the iconographic conventions that were more familiar to Latin beholders. This is partly due to the fact that he was mainly asked to represent universally shared figures and events; there is no doubt that everybody was able to recognise the Final Judgement on the inner facade, which clearly epitomises the canonical Byzantine rendering of the scene, such as the one we see in the *parekklesion* of the Kariye Camii. The main difference lies in the more evident emphasis on the iconographic hints at Christ’s passion, which was probably the outcome of the Genoese clergy’s special requests.

It is most revealing that, when Markos was requested to paint a lunette on the south wall with an image of the Virgin Mary between Saint Nicholas and Saint Lawrence, he decided to display an icon-like *glykophilousa* with half-figures of angels and failed to provide the bishop of Myra with the Latin insignia of his episcopal role, which enabled Western beholders to recognise him; he actually preferred to remain loyal to the traditional Byzantine representation of Nicholas as a bare-headed old man wearing *phelonion* and *omophorion* and holding the Book, whereas he attributed the features of a Western deacon to Saint Lawrence, a Latin saint whose iconography had not been developed in the East. In general terms, we can conclude that, notwithstanding his Western patrons, he made no special concessions to the figurative standards of Western art.

I would like to compare this example with the extensive, though barely preserved, frescoed programs in the cosmopolitan and culturally mixed town of Famagusta, the most important trade port of Lusignan Cyprus. In the fourteenth century, the town was

dotted with a plethora of churches ruled and officiated by such different religious groups as Latins, Greeks, western and eastern Syrians, Arab Melkites, Maronites, Armenians, Copts and Ethiopians; especially after the fall of Acre in 1291, the town became the most important and rich port of the Levant and housed many refugees from Latin Syria, who were allowed to preserve their political and fiscal rights as well as their cultural, devotional and even artistic traditions.³ In such a *mélange* milieu a Greek artist or a team of Greek artists disembarked, coming from one of the two metropolitan centres of mainland Byzantium, in c. 1360–70, as I have argued elsewhere.⁴ Remnants of this artist's (or group's) work are scattered throughout the ruined town churches and are best paralleled by a series of Thessalonikan frescoes (such as those in the Vlatadon monastery and the Prophitis Ilias

Figure 1 Unknown artist
Passion cycle, c. 1360–70
fresco
Southern apse, Church of Saint George of the Greeks,
Famagusta
Photograph Michele Bacci



church) that reinterpret the monumental and voluminous style of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries as a classicising expressionism characterised by linearly rendered heightenings and affected poses and movements coupled with a strong realistic treatment of some details (such as ears, fingers and eyes).

For such an artist, the most obvious church to work for was the Orthodox cathedral of Saint George of the Greeks, which was under construction in the 1360s, when the Greek bishop had been allowed to reinstall his curia within the walls of Famagusta (after 100 years of exile in Rizokarpasso). The church was astonishingly built, in Gothic forms, probably in order to emulate and appropriate the *decorum* of the sumptuously rayonnant Latin cathedral of Saint Nicholas. Although there are some grounds to think that at least a part of the decorative program was concentrated in the stained glass of the windows, the apses displayed an original frescoed program executed by a representative of the best metropolitan schools of painting. His work can now be most successfully evaluated by looking at the frescoes still preserved in the south apse, displaying a passion cycle that perfectly conforms to the standard illustration of such themes in Byzantine art, although framing them within large Gothicising bands, including Italianate quadrilobes (see figure 1).

Such an oddity can probably be explained as a consequence of the coexistence of artists of different training and origin in the urban space of Famagusta, and it is of great interest, since it reveals that Byzantine artists could be persuaded to imitate Western features, especially if they were not imbued with religious meaning. It could happen, however, that they were requested to visualise themes unprecedented in mainland Byzantium but acquiring a special emphasis in the context of a Western-ruled country in the Levant: the representation of ancient popes wearing tripartite tiaras in the main apse can be understood as a visual strategy either to remind Latins of the piety of their old patriarchs in the millennium preceding the schism or on

the contrary to celebrate the papacy on the part of a de facto Uniat Church.

Nonetheless, the work of the Palaiologan master was not limited to the Greek cathedral. His style, which is much different from that worked out on Cyprus during the Lusignan period, can easily be detected in the now lost frescoes of the church, which, although identified by Camille Enlart in 1899 as Saint Anne of the Maronites, was ruled by Westerners, as is revealed by the Latin inscriptions on the frescoes. Its southern wall was covered with a curious mixture of evangelical scenes and holy portraits, which contravened the organic separation of the two in the programs of mid to late Byzantine churches. Apart from this, however, it is worth stressing that, even if some Western features are introduced in the representations of female saints (such as the Gothic-shaped crowns), each scene seems to remain loyal to Byzantine conventions.

A trace of his passage is to be found also in the church known as that of the Nestorians, which, according to my interpretation, was more probably ruled by a community of west Syrians, Maronite or Melkite refugees from Jbail who could boast a Genoese citizenship (that is as 'white Genoese'). The building was decorated with a rather chaotic sequence of murals, some of them associated with funerary and votive meanings. The artist represented some holy figures in the nave—an apostle, a gigantic Saint Michael and a holy monk with Saint Menas, shown with the standard medallion of Christ Pantokrator on his chest (see figure 2). The latter are accompanied with a very elegant and ornate *Estrangelo* script: the one to the left of the monk's head reads '*qad(isho) m(ory)*' ('the holy saint'), as does that located next to Menas; however, the name '*myn*' (for Menas) seems to have been attributed to the holy monk, since it is inscribed just to the right of his face; there is no doubt that such an oddity must be understood as a mistake of the Greek painter, who probably happened to write out the wrong inscription from those he had been provided with by his Syrian donors.

The Palaiologan painter also decorated a lay patron's tomb located on the north wall



Figure 2 Unknown artist
A Holy Monk and Saint Menas, c. 1360–70
 fresco
 Church of Agios Georgios Exorinos (also known
 as the ‘Nestorian’ Church), Famagusta
 Photograph Michele Bacci

of the westernmost bay: it included a painted decoration on the moulded arch of the tomb niche, as well as on its intradox and the upper portion of wall. The iconography here is much more free than in the other cases and seems to stress the idea of the Virgin Mary’s divinity and regality: whereas a holy king (possibly David) is represented in the intradox, the Annunciation appears in the spandrels of the niche, and, over it, is represented a very odd theme, that known in late medieval Italy as Saint Anne ‘Metterza’, even if in that iconographic scheme (not witnessed before the fourteenth century) the figures were usually represented enthroned instead of standing in the orant pose. A medallion with the bust of Christ Emmanuel (symbolising the pre-incarnated God) is displayed on

his mother’s chest, whereas exactly behind Mary is represented Saint Anne in a praying gesture echoing that of the Mother of God; the latter’s haloed head happens to be located in the same position as Christ’s medallion. Next to the upper left margin a bowing angel is represented, just as in many Marian icons and in the remnant of fresco below. It seems self-evident that the image was aimed at emphasising the divine conception of Saint Anne by stressing the iconographical analogy of the two figures: in order to give expression to such a dogmatic feeling (which happens to have been familiar to Syrian tradition), the artist created something completely new, as is also revealed by the transposition of the typological model of the *vita icon* into mural decoration.

The same high-quality Palaiologan style appears in yet another place, the Carmelite church of Our Lady. This, too, was dotted with a rather chaotic series of frescoed panels associated with funerary and votive purposes and executed by different hands. In this case

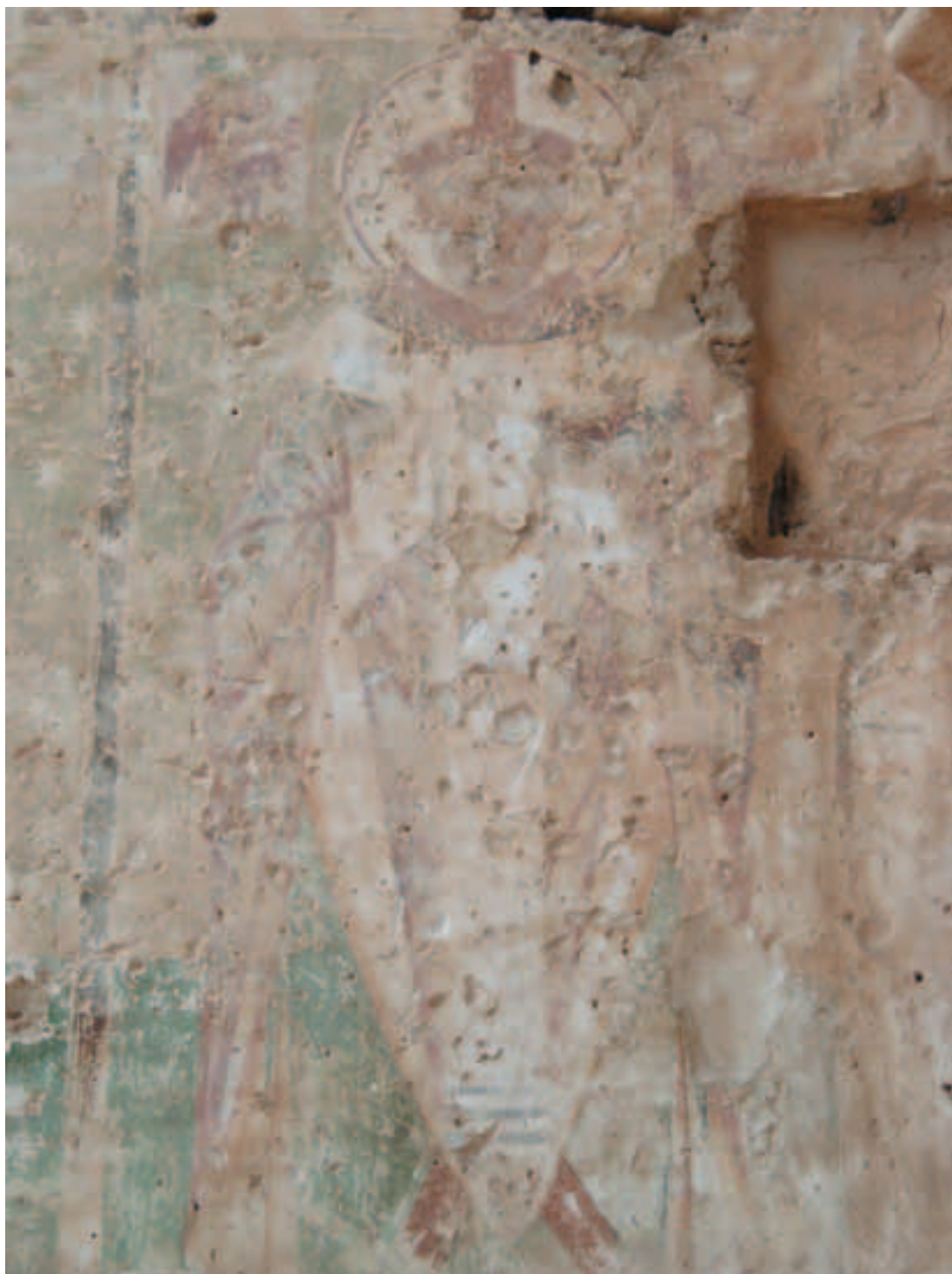


Figure 3 *Saint Nicholas*, c. 1360–70
fresco
Church of Saint Mary of Carmel, Famagusta
Photograph Michele Bacci

it is most probable that the Greek master's patron was a lay merchant longing for his soul's sake, just as those represented on the conch of the polygonal apse. On the northern wall he painted a sequence of four full-length holy prelates, only two of which are still readable; as revealed by their garments, they are both

Byzantine and Latin bishops. The best preserved figure, dressed in Latin garb, can be identified as Saint Nicholas (see figure 3); on the upper section of the fresco, flanking the saint's head, two scenes are still discernible of his hagiographic cycle: on the left, he is stopping the execution of three innocent men, whereas on the right he is throwing three bags of gold through the window into the room of a poor man who feels forced to prostitute his three daughters to escape poverty. Such a compositional *escamotage*, possibly imitating the location of coats of arms within tomb slabs, is rather rare and, to my knowledge, is encountered only in such stylistically mixed paintings as an early fifteenth-century Cretan icon formerly in a private collection in Munich, and should probably be considered an original interpretation on the part of the artist of the frescoed vita icon⁵.

To conclude, the remnants of murals in the Famagustan church provide some interesting clues as to understand how a Byzantine painter adapted his work to other people's needs and visual conventions within a peculiarly mixed Mediterranean society. Although he remained loyal to Byzantine tradition in his style and in the rendering of the most authoritative scenes and figures, he worked out original iconographic and compositional solutions that proved to be more fitted to the needs and visual conventions of non-Orthodox beholders. Moreover, he made selective use of the forms associated with other people's traditions, which were deemed to be universally efficacious on functional and aesthetic grounds, regardless of the religious and confessional context they were intended to embellish.

NOTES

- 1 Theophilus, *De diversis artibus*, book 1, ch. 1, ed. CR Dodwell, Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, 1961, p. 4.
- 2 RS Nelson, 'A Byzantine Painter in Trecento Genoa: The *Last Judgement* at San Lorenzo', *Art Bulletin*, no. 67, 1985, pp. 548–66; 'Byzantine Icons in Genoa before the Mandyon', in AR Calderoni Masetti, C Dufour Bozzo & G Wolf (eds), *Intorno al Sacro Volto. Genova, Bisanzio e il Mediterraneo* (secoli XI–XIV), Marsilio, Venice, 2007, pp. 79–92.
- 3 For some general remarks on Famagusta's artistic landscape as a paradigm of cultural interaction in a Mediterranean society, see Michele Bacci, 'L'arte: circolazione di modelli e interazioni culturali', in S Carocci (ed.), *Storia d'Europa e del Mediterraneo. Sezione IV. Il Medioevo (secoli V–XV)*, vol. 9 (*Strutture, preminenze, lessici comuni*), Salerno editrice, Rome, 2007, pp. 581–632. I am planning a thorough publication of the remnants of painted decorations in the town churches, which have been hitherto neglected, if one excepts the quick references in the more general works on the town architecture. See also C Enlart, *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, ed. D Hunt, Trigraph, London, 1987, pp. 246–303; G Jeffery, *A Description of the Historic Monuments of Cyprus: Studies in the Archaeology and Architecture of the Island*, WJ Archer, Nicosia, 1918, pp. 116–61; R Gunnis, *Historic Cyprus*, Rustem, Nicosia, 1973, pp. 89–104; T Mogabgab, 'Excavations and Researches in Famagusta, 1937–1939', in *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus (1937–1939)*, Department of Antiquities, Nicosia, 1951, pp. 181–90; TSR Boase, 'The Arts in Cyprus: A. Ecclesiastical Art', in KM Setton (ed.), *A History of the Crusades*, vol. 5 (*The Art and Architecture of the Crusader States*, ed. HW Hazard), University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1977, pp. 165–95; A Papageorgiou, 'L'art byzantin de Chypre et l'art des Croisés: influences réciproques', in *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus (1982)*, Department of Antiquities, Nicosia, 1982, pp. 217–26, esp. pp. 219–21; and J-B de Vaire & P Plagnieux (eds), *L'art gothique en Chypre*, Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, Paris, 2006, pp. 218–96.
- 4 M Bacci, 'Syrian, Palaiologan, and Gothic Murals in the "Nestorian" Church of Famagusta', *Δελτίον της χριστιανικής αρχαιολογικής εταιρείας*, vol. 4, no. 27, 2006, pp. 207–20. This article also contains more bibliographic references.
- 5 See M Vassilaki, 'San Nicola nella pittura di icone postbizantina', in M Bacci (ed.), *San Nicola. Splendori d'arte d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, exhibition catalogue, Skira, Milan, 2006, pp. 71–6, esp. p. 71 and figure 1.